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THE FOLK-LORE OF STRAW.

IN the pamphlet on County Folk-Lore (No. 1, Gloucestershire), edited by E. S. Hartland and very recently published by the Folk-Lore Society, I find correspondence and a note referring to a custom in several English counties of placing loose straw before the door of any man who beats his wife. A contributor, S. E. B., is cited as observing that "the loose straw or chaff at the door of the wife-beater is intended as an indication to his neighbors that he has been *threshing*."

I believe that we must seek for the origin of this custom in Germany, but it is probably of very widespread, ancient, Teutonic origin, and I doubt not that it may be found through all the north of Europe. It had originally no reference to threshing, but was applied specially to girls who had misbehaved, or whose morality had been questioned, broken straw being a synonym for worthlessness. In such case *cut* straw was placed before the door in the street on her marriage night. This custom, if I am not mistaken, was extended — as it very naturally or unavoidably would be — to newly married husbands who were suspected of cruelty, neglect, or other bad conduct.

This custom was so general that more than two centuries ago a very learned Latin legal dissertation on it was published, in which it is, with all its traditions, discussed in detail. This is a work of one hundred and forty pages octavo, entitled "*De Injuriis quæ Novis Nuptis haud raro inferri solent. I. Per sparsiozem Dissectorum Culmeorum frugum. Germ : Durch das Werferling Streuen. II. Per injustam Interpellationem. III. Per Ligationes Magicas.*"

The book begins with the grave query : "Should harlots be condemned to wear straw garlands ? " *Nisi forte se intendant, quod sicut culmus aristæ adhuc junctus est signum integritatis, ita dissecti culmi sint signum corruptionis et hinc indicare velint, quod sponsa de virginitate amissa sit suspecta, quod vulgo vocatur, Braut-Heckerling Streuen.*" The work was published in Quedlinburg, without date, but evidently about 1650.

I may here observe that two centuries ago, and during all previous time, resemblances, similes, metaphors, emblems, symbols, or "signatures" were of far greater importance than at present. As children are readily caught by contrasts, and moved to laughter or admiration merely because there is a likeness suddenly presented, — so all men were once more deeply moved by *poetry*, or thought expressing itself in other forms, or in unwonted manner. This has begun to pass away very rapidly ; in fact it is within the memory of man when the

pun occupied a high position in even cultivated society. Of old, the simile was deeply felt everywhere. It is often found almost as a great truth or authority — as in "*Petrus es*" — without a suspicion of levity. This is a great truth, and a principle which every folklorist who is something more than a mere composer and collator, and who rises from the dead letter of dates to the spirit of humanity, should bear in mind.

The simile of the worthlessness of *straw* sank deeply, and spread far and wide, in the olden time. Thus in Malachi iv. 1 we read: "Behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all the wicked, shall be stubble [German version, *straw*], and the day that cometh shall burn them up." Also Isaiah xxv. 10. It was a very ancient custom in France to signify, by breaking a straw, that all allegiance was broken or denied. Thus, A. D. 922, Charles the Simple was reproached by his barons as cowardly, and incompetent to rule, after which, as a sign that they renounced him, all *broke straw* and cast it down before him.

In Munich (*vide* Park, "Sitten und Gebräuche der Deutschen," 1849) it was a custom to lay straw before the houses of old maids or bachelors because they had given to the world no *Koerner*, i. e. grain, or children, a custom still remembered when I was a student at the University of that city in 1847. Death and winter are symbolized in many curious German customs by straw; that is to say, a want of life or of fertility or value, as in Vliesingen, where it is hung before a house wherein a corpse lies. Hence the expressions, *Strohmittwer* and *Strohnittwe*, which according to Friedrich ("Die Symbolik und Mythologie der Natur," 1859) are ancient terms indicating that the marriage of the persons is only a sham, *eine Scheinehe*, as a straw without grain is only "a sham fruit." Hence "straw-bail" and "a man of straw."

Yet, as straw has its uses, it has not been universally a symbol of worthlessness. There is a legend of Aargau, in Switzerland, that when Christ went to Bethlehem to pass his birthday with his family, an old man reminded him that he, Christ, had been born thirty years before on straw in the old man's stable. To which the Lord replied: "Straw was my first bed among ye: well, then, let it be blest." Therefore to this day the Aargau folk weave straw bands at Easter, and the animals which are driven with them flourish and fatten finely, and the trees which are bound about therewith yield fruit abundantly.

And here I reflect all at once and with surprise, while I pause for another example *per contra* to the credit of this despised article, that I am in the centre of the very Land of Straw itself, where thousands get their living from it. When I pass to my *café* in the Signoria —

for I am writing in Florence, where I chiefly dwell — I shall pass through a straw market, where wagon-loads of neat little bundles of straw for braiding will be selling, or, should I climb yon hill which lies before me as I write, and stray to Fiesole, I shall meet on the road many women and children, all plaiting, while under every shelter there will be groups of girls, seated before small looms, weaving it into different forms. Straw is indeed the blessing of this country.

It may not be known to the reader that the performance *tenui avena* on the straw-pipe, as mentioned by Virgil, involved a deeper mystery than mere making of music. It was a banishment of evil influence, or *malocchio*. Fromann in his inexhaustible treasury of folklore, "Tractatus de Fascinatione," 1675, tells us that from different plants different whistles can be made for different sanitary purposes: *e. g.* those made from hellebore cure "lymphaticas;" those from the bark of the *ricinus*, or castor-oil bean, "hydropicas." Playing on a whistle of poplar bark soothes "*ischia dos dolores*." Weakness or melancholy, or *deliquium animi*, may be dispelled by playing softly unto people on pipes made of cinnamon bark. What the moral or physical result would be from performing on tubes of macaroni I do not know, but according to the theory of Fromann, that the sound follows the medical nature of the pipe, it should allay hunger, and most assuredly the sound of a willow-bark whistle must create an appetite, since from it is made the salycine extract which is not less tonic than quinine.

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